

## Old government mills at the Falls of St. Anthony /

THE OLD GOVERNMENT MILLS AT THE FALLS OF ST. ANTHONY By Courtesy of Edward A Bromley, from his "Photographic History of Early Days in Minneapolis" (1990).

### **THE OLD GOVERNMENT MILLS AT THE FALLS OF ST. ANTHONY.\***

\* Read at the monthly meeting of the Executive Council, March 14, 1904.

BY EDWARD A. BROMLEY.

The world-famed milling industries of Minneapolis had their beginning at the same time with the building of Fort Snelling. These first mills in our territory were a familiar sight to many of our people who are yet living; but already a cloud of doubt has arisen as to the exact dates of their erection, and whether there was originally one mill or two.

In Atwater's History of Minneapolis (1893), on pages 535 and 536, Hon. James T. Wyman expressed the view, which the writer of; the present paper also formerly entertained,† that only one mill was erected by the United States troops at the Falls of St. Anthony before the completion of Fort Snelling; that this, commonly called the Government Mill, was a small stone building, used as a grist mill from 1822 to 1830; and that at the latter date a saw mill was built there.

† Descriptive text accompanying "Early Scenes n Minneapolis," published in 1903.

The different view, that two separate mills were built by the government at about the same time, in 1821 to 1823, has been found to be correct, as I now think, after careful inquiry and research. Mr. Rufus J. Baldwin gave a good picture of the old mills, from a daguerreotype or photograph taken about the year 1857, in Atwater's History of Minneapolis, on page 22; but, though the picture shows the two mills, his description

## Library of Congress

indicates only one, used originally for sawing lumber, and two years later fitted up as a grist mill. Baldwin seems to have accepted the statement given by Dr. Neill, a dozen years before, in the History of Hennepin County. The object of this paper is to present 636 the reasons for my conclusion, that two mills were built here thus early, and to narrate concisely the origin and history of this prelude to our state's vast wealth of lumber and flour manufacturing.

Coincident with the erection of a permanent post at Fort Snelling, the soldiers of the Fifth Infantry, who were performing all the labor on that structure, built on the west bank of the Mississippi river, at these falls, as seems now to be well ascertained, both a saw mill and a flour mill. That historic spot is now the center of the great milling district of Minneapolis.

The first of these mills was put up in 1821, and was equipped with a quick acting upright saw, known among lumbermen as a muley-saw. The other was built and fitted up in 1823 with one run of stone (French buhrs) and other simple appliances for making flour, according to the primitive methods then in vogue.

The flour mill was about 16 or 18 feet square, and the saw mill is said to have measured about 50 by 70 feet. The first estimate is from my personal examination of the foundation walls, which I made in 1879, when the last vestige of the two structures was removed; and the other is given by George E. Huey, who operated the saw mill from 1852 to 1855. The well known picture, however, indicates a considerably smaller size for the saw mill.

Fortunately an authentic account, written by an eye witness of the building of the saw mill, is obtainable at this time. The narrator was Philander Prescott, the well known Indian trader, and was written by him at the suggestion of the Minnesota Historical Society in 1861, about one year prior to his tragic death at the hands of the Sioux Indians at the Lower Sioux Agency on the Minnesota river, in the outbreak of 1862. It was published in Volume VI of this Society's Collections.

## Library of Congress

Prescott came to the fort in 1819 as a clerk to Mr. Devotion, the Indian trader, while the troops were still in the original log cantonment on the Mendota side of the Minnesota river. Some years later Prescott took to himself an Indian wife, and began trading with the Sioux on his own account, establishing himself at "Land's End," about two miles above the fort, on the west bank of the Minnesota river. His first home was located just outside the walls of Fort Snelling on the bank of this river, and his 637 second on the military road between Minnehaha Falls and St. Anthony Falls, about one mile from the former. This house, built about 1850, is still standing. He traded extensively with the Sioux Indians and was frequently absent from home, looking after his interests in their camps or at the trading posts. While on one of these expeditions, awaiting the arrival of annuity funds, which were to be paid by the government to the Sioux at the Lower Agency, near Redwood Falls, Minnesota, he met his death on August 18, 1862, being one of the first persons killed by the savages in the general massacre which began there and spread over the southwestern part of the state.

That part of Prescott's narrative which relates to the old saw mill is as follows:

In the summer of 1820 there was not much done towards the building of the fort. The physician and commanding officer thought the location [on the bottomland at the riverside] an unhealthful one, and moved all the troops over to some springs called "Camp Coldwater," nearly a mile above the present fort, on the Mississippi river...a site was selected by the commanding officer on the first rise, about 300 yards west of the present fort, and some timber was hauled to the spot. As the fort was to be built of hewed logs, it would require a large amount of boards for so large a fort. An examination of the Little Falls (Minnehaha) was made, and it was thought there was not water enough for a mill, as the water was very low in the summer of 1820, and St. Anthony was selected. An officer and some men had been sent up the river to examine the pine and see if it could be got to the river by hand. The party returned and made a favorable report, and in the winter [1820–1] a party was sent out to cut pine logs, and to raft them down in the spring, and

## Library of Congress

they brought down about 2,000 logs by hand. Some ten or fifteen men would haul one log on a sled from one-fourth to one-half a mile, and lay it upon the bank of Rum river, and in the spring they were rolled into the river and floated down to the mouth and then made into small rafts and floated to the present landing above the bridge. [The landing referred to was later Captain John Tapper's ferry landing, near the present steel arch bridge in Minneapolis.]

...The plans for the fort had been prepared [by Lt. Col. Leavenworth]...but were somewhat altered by Col. Snelling, the officer succeeding, and the location was moved from the point that Col. Leavenworth selected to the present location, and the saw mill was commenced in the fall and winter of 1820–21 and finished in 1822, and a large quantity of lumber was made for the whole fort, and all the furniture and outbuildings, and all the logs were brought to the mill or the landing by hand, and hauled from the landing to the mill, and from the mill to the fort by teams. An officer by the name of Lieut. Croozer [William E. Kruger is the officer referred 638 to] lived and had charge of the mill party...the troops passed the summer at Camp Coldwater, and in the fall moved back again to the old cantonment and passed the winter, and got out timber for the soldiers' barracks, and before the autumn of 1823 nearly all the soldiers had been got into quarters, and considerable work had been done on the officers' quarters.

Mr. Deniel Stanchfield confirms Prescott's statement that the pine timber used in the fort was cut near Rum river. In 1847 and 1848 he examined these pineries, and in Volume IX of the Minnesota Historical Society Collections, page 342, he wrote:

On a tributary which enters this river from the northeast about four miles north of the present town of Cambridge, I found a small lake and good white pine on every side. This was afterward called Lower Stanchfield brook. I logged there two years, which was the first lumbering upon a large scale on Rum river.

## Library of Congress

A part of the lumber for building Fort Snelling, however, had been cut on the same lake; for we found on its shore the remains of an old logging camp that had been there many years. In its vicinity pine trees had been cut and taken away, and the stumps had partially decayed. Logging had also been done at the same early date in the Dutchman's grove, where my party in the autumn of 1847 got the logs designed for building the St. Anthony dam. This grove was on the southwest side of the river, about midway between the Lower and Upper Stanchfield brooks, which come from the opposite side.

The first printed reference, so far as known, to two mills at the Falls of St. Anthony, is furnished by Prof. William H. Keating, who, as the historian of the party, accompanied Major Stephen H. Long's expedition up the Mississippi river in 1823. After telling how the party waded over on the limestone river bed, close above the brink of the falls, to the island, and then returned, he says: "Two mills have been erected for the use of the garrison, and a sergeant's guard is kept here at all times. On our return from the island we recruited our strength with a copious and palatable meal prepared for us by the old sergeant."

Every traveler who wrote of the portage of the falls, prior to the incoming of the settlers, almost invariably mentioned the mills there, after indulging in praises of the mighty cataract. But frequently only one mill was so mentioned.

Beltrami, in his "Pilgrimage," published in London in 1828, says, in Volume II, page 206: "A mill and a few little cottages, 639 built by the colonel for the use of the garrison, and the surrounding country adorned with romantic scenes, complete the magnificent picture." Again on his return, at the end of his long journey from Pembina, he wrote of his coming to the Falls of St. Anthony: "The strength of the current hurried forward our canoe with alarming rapidity; and at length I discerned between the trees, and in a pleasant background, the roof of a house, indicating of course civilized habitation. This was the mill for the garrison at the fort."

## Library of Congress

Corroborative evidence of the existence of two mills at the falls in furnished by Colonel John H. Bliss, whose father was commander at Fort Snelling from 1833 to 1836. In his "Reminiscences of Fort Snelling," which can be found in Volume VI of the Minnesota Historical Society Collections, he says, on page 339:

The Falls of Saint Anthony, too, were picturesque; the government had a little muley saw-mill there, and a small grist-mill, for grinding corn, all, of course, for the use of the garrison; there, too, was kept our supply of beef cattle. All this necessitated the erection of a comfortable building for the sergeant and eight or ten men who had charge of things, and this was all there then was of the splendid city of Minneapolis. We used occasionally to have picnics there, and drove out a few times of a winter night, had a hot supper and a whisky punch, and back to the Fort again, with the coyotes howling about us, but rarely in sight.

On page 346 he makes another reference to the mills as follows:

One day word was brought to the Fort that they [the Indians] had burned the mills at the Falls of Saint Anthony and murdered the men in charge. A strong force was at once dispatched there, and everything about the Fort put in defensible shape. When the detachment reached the mills they were found uninjured, and the men quietly pursuing their avocations without the slightest suspicion that they had been tomahawked and scalped.

On pages 347 and 348 is another reference:

To the best of my recollection, it was in the spring of 1833 that two brothers named Pond wandered that way. They said they had come to devote themselves to the welfare of the Indians, and I believe they did this to the full extent and limit of their abilities. They were earnest workers, with no nonsense about them. My father supplied them, from the saw-mill, with the necessary lumber for a neat, comfortable, two-roomed little house,

## Library of Congress

and in conjunction with Major Taliaferro [the Indian agent], aided them in their start at housekeeping on the shore of Lake Calhoun, a short distance from the Indian village.

640

Mrs. Charlotte O. Van Cleve, in her delightful book of a comparatively recent date, "Three Score Years and Ten," says, on page 42:

How sweet those berries were, and how delicious the fish which we caught in the pretty Lakes Calhoun and Harriet, the one named for the great statesman, the other for Mrs. Leavenworth. We generally carried our treasures from field and lake to the "old Government Mill" at the "Big Falls" St. Anthony and had our feast prepared and set in order by the miller's wife.

Rev. Stephen R. Riggs, in his entertaining book, "Mary and I, Forty Years with the Sioux," published in 1880, referring to a trip which he and his wife had made in 1837 from Fort Snelling, where they were temporarily residing, to the mill, says, on page 24: "And so, we harnessed up a horse and cart, and had a pleasant ride across the prairie to the government saw-mill, which, with a small dwelling for the soldier occupant, was then the only sign of civilization on the present site of Minneapolis."

Dr. Edward D. Neill, in the History of Hennepin County (1881), on pages 94 and 95, mentions a memorandum from the books of the U. S. A. Commissary Department, at Washington, showing that the flour mill at the falls of St. Anthony was fitted up in 1823, after having been used, as he supposed, for two years in sawing lumber, the date when it was built being 1821. Under date of August 5, 1823, as Dr. Neill says, General Gibson wrote to Lieutenant Clark, Commissary at Fort Snelling, as follows: "From a letter addressed by Col. Snelling to the Quartermaster General, dated the 2d of April, I learn that a large quantity of wheat would be raised this summer. The assistant Commissary of Subsistence at St. Louis has been instructed to forward sickles and a pair of millstones to

## Library of Congress

St. Peters. If any flour is manufactured from the wheat raised, be pleased to let me know. ...” The memorandum was for the following items:

One pair buhr millstones \$250.11

337 pounds plaster of Paris 20.22

Two dozen sickles 18.00

Total dollar;288.33

Rev. William T. Boutwell, the historian accompanying Schoolcraft to “the tribes near the source of the Mississippi river,” in 641 1832, recorded in his journal (published in Volume I of this Society's Collections), under date of July 25 of that year, the following reference to the government mills.

Embarked at five this morning, and marched till twelve, when we reached the falls of St. Anthony, nine miles above the mouth of the St. Peter's. Our government have here a saw-mill and grist-mill on the west bank of the Mississippi, and also have a large farm. The soldiers are here cutting hay. For beauty, the country around exceeds all that I can say.

Gen. R. W. Johnson, who served at Fort Snelling for several years subsequent to 1849, contributed his mite to the mill story, in this Society's Volume VIII, as follows: “A saw mill was established at the Falls of St. Anthony, where was manufactured all the lumber used in the construction of the fort.” Some of the old buildings of the fort, however, when recently torn down, were found to be built largely with hewn timber for framing, while much of their plank and board lumber was evidently sawn by hand with whip-saws, familiar to frontier settlers. It is thus known that the pine timber from Rum river, sawn at the government mill, was only a part of the material used for building the fort, and that other lumber, as of oak, elm, etc., from the woods along the rivers and uplands near the fort, was also supplied by the ax and whip-saw.



## Library of Congress

On page 95, of Volume VI, of the Minnesota Historical Society Collections, in "Early Days at Red River Settlement, and Fort Snelling," Mrs. Ann Adams wrote of the unsuccessful efforts made by the commanding officer of the fort to manufacture flour in the government mill, as follows:

Fort Snelling was not, at that time [1823], completely finished, but was occupied. Col. Snelling had sowed some wheat that season, and had it ground at a mill which the government had built at the falls, but the wheat had become mouldy, or sprouted, and made wretched, black, bitter tasting bread. This was issued to the troops, who got mad because they could not eat it, and brought it to the parade ground and threw it down there. Col. Snelling came out and remonstrated with them. There was much inconvenience that winter (1823–24) about the scarcity of provisions.

The government authorities ran the grist mill in a desultory way until 1849, when the property was purchased by Hon. Robert Smith, of Illinois, for dollar;750. He rented the grist mill to Calvin 41 642 A. Tuttle, who operated it until about 1855. His advertisement, soliciting business, appeared in the St. Anthony Express of the date of May 31, 1851, as follows:

### **GRINDING.**

The undersigned is now in readiness for grinding Corn, Rye Cats, Peas, Buckwheat, and whatever else requires grinding, including Salt, at the grist-mill on the west side of the Mississippi river at St. Anthony, for lawful rates of toll. When desired, grists will be received at the subscriber's on the east side of the river, and be returned ground at the same place.

Calvin A. Tuttle .

The following quotation is from the St. Paul Pioneer of February 13, 1850:

## Library of Congress

The Government mill on the west side of the falls of St. Anthony, mentioned in Mr. Neill's historical address, is still there in a dilapidated condition, in charge of Mr. Bean, who is living there as a tenant of the honorable Robert Smith. It is the same mill in which the Grand Jury of this county held the first inquest last summer.

The address referred to was delivered before the Minnesota Historical Society, January 1, 1850. The reference to the mills is given in a supplement of this address, published in the Pioneer of February 13, 1850, as follows: "A quarter of a century ago, the United States had two mills in operation here, which were watched by a sergeant's guard."

A week later, the Pioneer of February 20, 1850, devoted a column to an editorial description of St. Anthony, from which the following is an extract:

The bluff...commands a beautiful view of the opposite shore, where is situated the grist mill, now in operation, built by the U. S. government. This mill is under the superintendence of the Hon. Robert Smith, in charge of Mr. Bean; 4,000 bushels of corn have been ground at this mill during the present season for the Indian trade and inhabitants of Minnesota, and about the same quantity remains to be ground; there is a saw mill, in connection with this mill, which is undergoing repairs and will be in operation in the spring. It is situated on the west side of the river and nearly opposite the Co. Mill....

August 20, 1849, Judge Bradley B. Meeker, associate judge of the Supreme Court of Minnesota Territory, held the first term of court for the second judicial district in one of these old 643 government mills at the Falls of St. Anthony. Franklin Steele was foreman of the jury; and James M. Goodhue, editor of the St. Paul Pioneer, was one of the jurors. No business was transacted, but Goodhue's appreciation of the dinner served by Reuben Bean inspired an editorial in the next issue of his paper.

The subsequent history of the old mills is soon told. The "town site company," so called, of which Robert Smith was the president, fitted up the saw mill, and, under the personal

## Library of Congress

direction of George E. Huey, operated it until 1855. The St. Anthony Express, February 18, 1854, contributed the following item: "It is said that Messrs. George E. Huey & Co., proprietors of the Minneapolis Mills, have added another saw to their mill. They have been quite successful in clearing the falls from pine logs." This saw mill was leased in 1855 to Leonard Day. After he had run it for about two years, it was sold to Thomas H. Perkins and Smith Ferrand, and was operated by them as a grist mill until 1862, when Perkins and Crocker bought it. They named it the City Mill.

In 1866, as Hon. James T. Wyman relates, the City Mill was sold to J. C. Berry and Co., who changed it into a merchant mill and operated it until 1875, when they sold it to Solon Armstrong and Co. This company ran it, producing a good quality of flour by the old method, until 1879, when it was destroyed by fire. Its destruction made the building of the Northwestern Flour Mill, by Sidle, Fletcher and Holmes, possible; and that mill occupies today the site of the old government saw mill.

The grist mill, which was situated about fifty feet to the rear and east of the saw mill, had been torn down within a few years after the lease to Mr. Day was made. When the Minneapolis paper mill was erected in 1866, at the foot of Seventh Avenue South, half of the site of the old government mill was occupied by that structure; and when the Northwestern Flour Mill was built, in 1879, all traces of these old landmarks disappeared.